Two Generations Enjoyed Kuenzi Milk and Popcorn

By: Dale C. Maley
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Johannes "John" Kuenzi was born in Frutigen, Berne County, Switzerland in 1864. He moved from Switzerland to Fairbury in 1880 when he was sixteen years of age. He purchased a farm one-half mile north of Locust Street. This farm was northwest of the Prairie Central High School.

He married Miss Caroline Meis in 1891. They had seven children. Son John Adam Kuenzi was born in 1895. Another son, Joseph "Joe" Nicholas Kuenzi was born in 1897. Caroline died in 1905.

John Kuenzi Sr. converted part of his farmland into six city blocks in 1893. This tract of land was north of Hickory Street and west of Fourth Street. This area is known as the Kuenzi Addition to Fairbury. The Kuenzi Dairy company was founded in 1895. John Kuenzi made daily deliveries of milk to houses in Fairbury. The milk was bottled in glass jars with the "Kuenzi Dairy" lettering on each bottle. A significant fire wiped out the barn and all of their milk cows. John Kuenzi Sr. built a new larger barn in 1916 and slowly renewed his herd. They typically milked forty cows on their farm.

In those early years, they also had a grape vineyard. John Kuenzi Sr. once sold a car of wine made on his Fairbury farm to a company in Peoria.

Around 1909, John Kuenzi Sr. decided to diversify further and add the production of popcorn to his dairy farm. In the early years, the yield was only about one ton per acre. By 1959, the yield had increased to two tons per acre because of hybrid research performed at Purdue University. Two tons of popcorn was equivalent to 100 bushels per acre of corn. Advertisements for mail-order sales of Kuenzi popcorn were placed in many national publications.

In June of 1918, John Kuenzi Jr. was inducted into the U.S. Army. After finishing basic training at Camp Wheeler in Georgia, he traveled by ship to Liverpool, England. John Kuenzi Jr. arrived in Liverpool thirteen days after the fighting in World War I ended. He was then stationed in France until he sailed for home in July of 1919.

After World War I ended, at the age of twenty-eight, John Kuenzi Jr. met Mrs. Almeta Clinesmith and married her in 1923. Her maiden name was Almeta Rosenbaum. She was divorced from Mr. Clinesmith and had a nine-year-old daughter, Virginia M. Clinesmith. John and Almeta had no children together and divorced in 1935. She married William A. Weise in 1937.

Every day, their forty milk cows had to be milked by hand. In 1919, they were one of the first farms in the Fairbury area to purchase a milking machine.

Joe Kuenzi never married. He was a member of the Mohammed Shrine at Peoria and played clarinet with the Shriner's band for parades and conventions all over the country. He also played for years with a widely known area dance orchestra.

In 1924, John Kuenzi Sr. died in Fairbury at age sixty. His funeral was a large one with people traveling from several states to attend. After his death, his two sons continued the Kuenzi Dairy business.

The two Kuenzi brothers established an airport at their dairy farm. The runway was in the north and south directions. The brothers helped to organize the Prairie Farm Land Flying Farmers group in 1946. In 1962, the brothers were chosen Flying Farmers of the Year for Illinois. They also were active members of the International Flying Farmers and attended seventeen international conventions in the United States and Canada.

As demand continued to increase for their popcorn, the Kuenzi's expanded their popcorn production to 160 acres. The invention and introduction of the television to American homes dramatically reduced the demand for popcorn. People stayed home to watch TV instead of going to the movie house and buying popcorn. Theaters in small towns closed all across the United States. The Kuenzi operation reduced their 160 acres of popcorn down to only eighty-four acres by 1959.

In 1935, Kuenzi Dairy stopped making residential deliveries of milk. They continued to sell milk to a cheese factory after they stopped delivery to Fairbury homes. Area farmers gradually purchased all of the forty milk cows they had at the farm.

As more and more houses started to infringe upon their farm, the brothers had to close their airport runway in 1964. They also discontinued growing popcorn at that time.

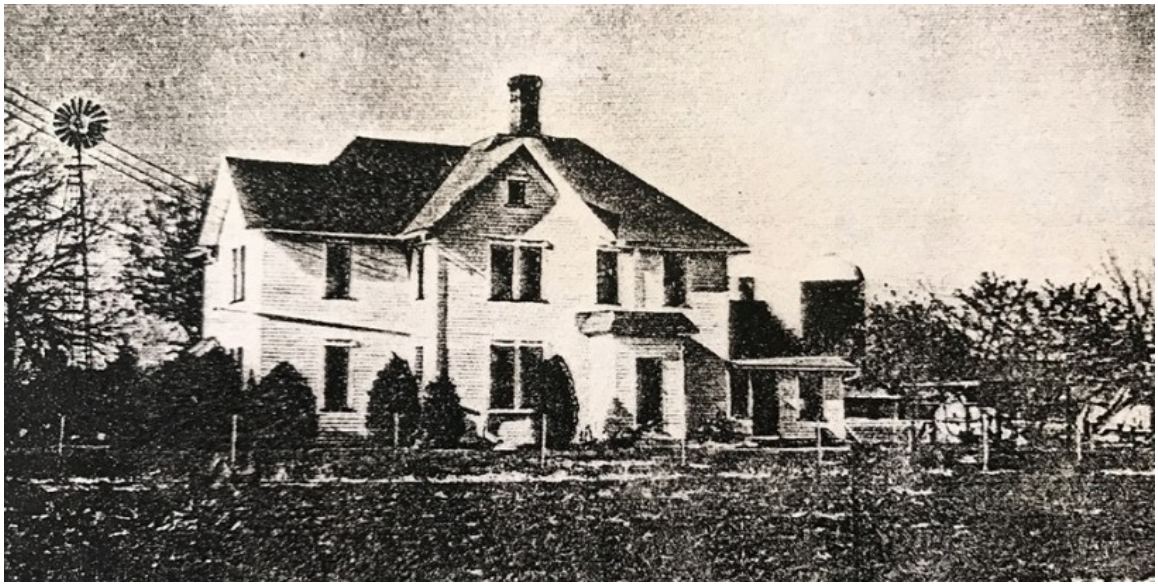
The last few years of their lives, the Kuenzi brothers wintered together in Florida. They joked they had become CBM farmers (corn, beans, and Miami). Joseph Kuenzi died in 1969 at the age of seventy-two in Daytona Beach, Florida. His obituary noted that a nephew and two nieces were reared in the Kuenzi home. They were Andrew Zimmerman, Mrs. Caroline Slagel, and Mrs. Norma Hoffman.

John Kuenzi Jr. died at the Fairview Haven nursing home in Fairbury in 1978 at the age of eighty-three. Both brothers were buried in Fairbury's Graceland Cemetery.

The Kuenzi family left their mark on Fairbury. Two generations of Fairbury citizens enjoyed their milk and popcorn. A popcorn maker than used Joe Kuenzi's popcorn at the Fairbury Fair and races has been restored, and Kuenzi descendants own it. Local collectors avidly seek glass milk bottles from the Kuenzi Dairy. In area auctions, a Kuenzi Dairy glass bottle typically sells for over $100.

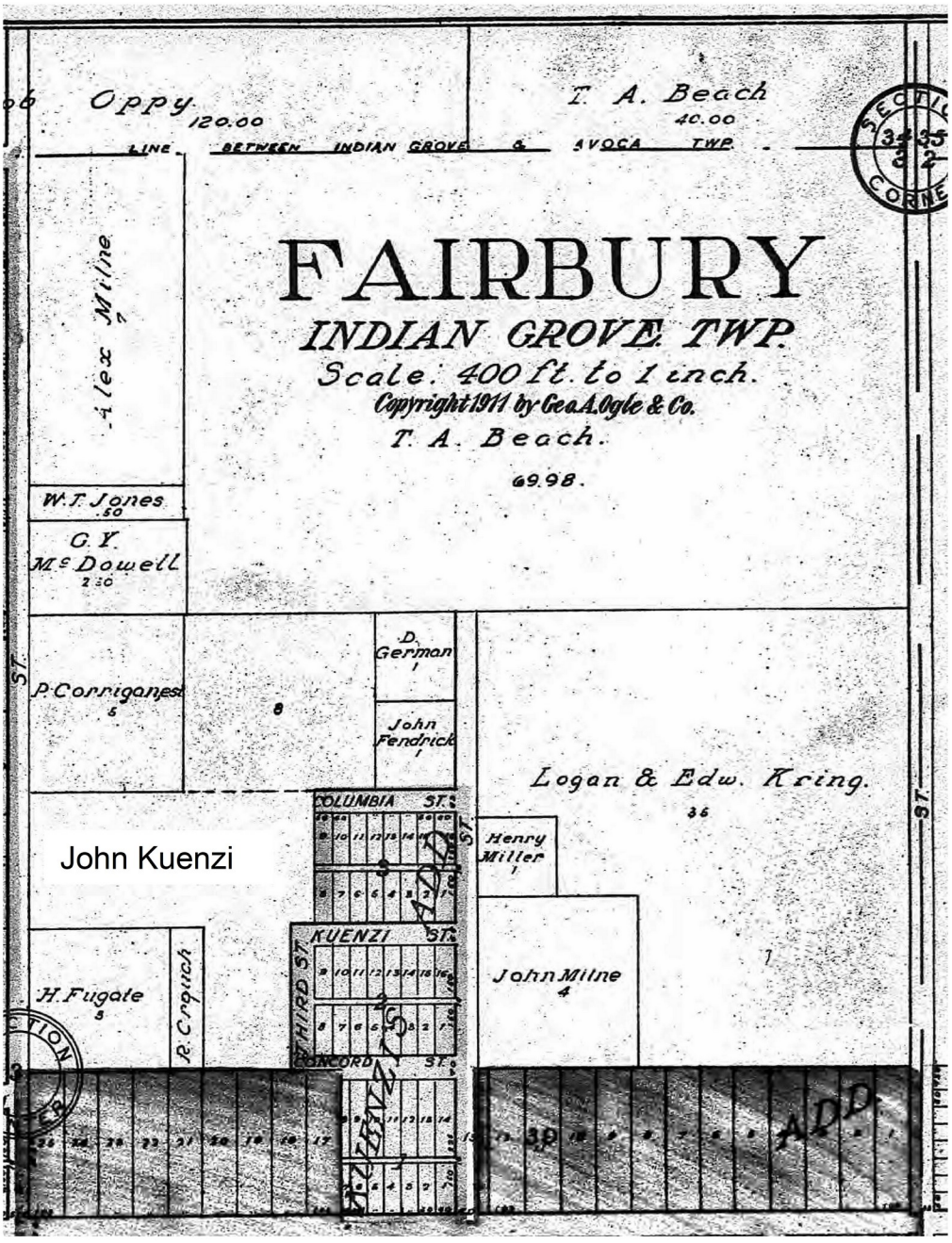
The restored popcorn popper that was used at the Fairbury Fair and races is owned by Tresa Maul, left, and her daughters, Marti Baurer, and Riley Maul. They are descendants of the Kuenzi family.

Joe Kuenzi and his plane



Kueinzi Farm House

North



1911 Atlas showing Kuenzi farm